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INFO RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 0315
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 7880
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 1603
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 9041
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1679
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 9834
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA 0682
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SUBJECT: FORMER PM ZIA REPORTEDLY AGREES TO QUIT BANGLADESH

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Geeta Pasi; reason 1.4(d)

¶1. (C) Zia Agrees to Leave: Former Prime Minister and leader of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party Khaleda Zia has agreed to leave Bangladesh and not return, according to press reports and sources close to Zia. Her decision comes less than 48 hours after the arrest of her youngest son, Arafat "Coco" Rahman, on unspecified charges. Coco was released at 1245 AM April 17, prompting speculation of a deal between Zia and the government. Also on April 17, an appellate level court stayed for six months proceedings in the extortion case against Tarique Rahman, Zia's eldest son. Zia's departure plans and destination are not yet final, however, leaving open the possibility she might change her mind.

¶2. (C) Confirmation from Family: Tarique Rahman's wife, Dr. Jobaida "Jhunu" Rahman, spoke with the Embassy and confirmed Zia's decision to leave. Dr. Rahman said Coco's arrest, coupled with threats by the military to file charges against Zia and "create more trouble for" Tarique, left Zia with no other choice. Dr. Rahman claimed the only condition the family is seeking to impose is the release of Tarique on bail on compassionate grounds with permission to travel abroad for medical treatment. According to Dr. Rahman, Tarique has high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and back pain and has lost nearly 16 pounds since his arrest.

¶3. (C) And from Friends: Former BNP MP Mushifiquir Rahman, one of the few non-family members permitted access to Khaleda Zia's house, also told us that "it is more or less decided that she will leave and that Arafat will go with her." Tarique's fate remains undecided. A classmate and friend of the Chief Advisor, Rahman said the military used Zia's brother, Major (Ret'd.) Sayeed Iskandar and Major General Rumi to broker the deal with Zia. Rahman also said the threat of further charges was used to encourage Zia to agree to leave. (Note: Zia appointed Rumi Director General Forces Intelligence. End Note.)

¶4. (C) Departure Expected Soon: Rahman expects that Zia might leave anytime before Sheikh Hasina's expected return date on April 23. He said that Hasina left Bangladesh with an understanding with the military that she would not return and that Khaleda Zia would be sent abroad. He says that when the military made no efforts to expel Zia, Hasina began to announce her own plans to return. Now, he said, "the military will send Zia abroad to prevent Hasina from returning."

¶5. (C) Saudi Arabia Likely Destination: Media speculated

that Zia would leave for Saudi Arabia with Coco, and Tarique would follow once granted "medical bail." Dr. Rahman would not confirm the timing of the family's departure but implied they would travel to Saudi Arabia.

16. (C) Comment: Public reaction was muted. Given the fluid nature of Bangladeshi politics, few will count on Zia's decision until she actually departs. Many people, including political party insiders, believe political reform is not possible so long as "the two ladies" remain in Bangladesh, and will welcome their departure from Bangladesh. Whether they will go quietly into exile, however, or will continue to cast a shadow from afar, remains to be seen. End Comment.

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